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THE FIRST SIX WEEKS OF McCLELLAN'S PENINSULAR CAMPAIGN

IF one desires to read a chapter of blunders, or wishes to show how costly it is for a peace-loving people devoted to an industrial civilization to learn the lesson of war, or if he would have an example how decisive events fail of accomplishment wholly for the lack of a great general, let him read the story of McClellan's Peninsular Campaign. The plan itself was an unfortunate one. Not that from a military point of view it was inherently bad, for that contention is probably disposed of by the fact that twice and perhaps thrice during its attempted execution the chances were more than even that McClellan's noble and faithful army would go into Richmond had he given the word of attack, and had he been present on the field of battle to issue the orders and to make the disposition of forces that hardly would have failed to suggest themselves to a man of his technical training. The plan of the Peninsular Campaign was an unfortunate one, from the fact that the President's consent to it had actually been wrung from him, his objection being that to make the advance upon Richmond *via* Fortress Monroe and the peninsula between the York and James rivers deprived Washington of the protection of the main Federal army. Had McClellan been a man who looked at facts as they were, instead of as he wished them to be, he would have appreciated that he could not expect as perfect co-operation from Lincoln as if he had determined upon a direct advance overland to Richmond, which was the plan favored by the President, and which at least had equal military merit with the other. The second blunder lay in the misunderstanding between Lincoln and McClellan as to the proper force which should be left to protect Washington, and which resulted in the withdrawal from the General's command of McDowell's corps of 35,000 men. Yet as it is the consensus of opinion that it was the lack of generalship and not the lack of men which caused the failure of the campaign, that failure may not be imputed to the President for doing what in his best judgment was necessary to do for the safety of the capital.

April 2, 1862, McClellan reached Fortress Monroe. April 3, according to his own figures, he had with him, ready to move,

58,000 men ; and the rest of his force, which he maintains made his effective total but 85,000, and which the President insisted made 108,000, was coming to him as fast as transports could bring them from Alexandria. April 4 the army began to move, and the next day appeared along the whole front of the Confederate line, which stretched from Yorktown across to the James River, a distance of thirteen miles. To hold this line Magruder had 11,000 men, and his reinforcements were arriving very slowly. McClellan's general report, written August 4, 1863, confirmed as it is by a private letter written to his wife when he was before Yorktown, makes it clear that he entertained a simple and correct plan of operations, which was by rapid movements to drive the enemy before him, open the James River, advance on Richmond and attack it before the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia could receive large reinforcements. Political as well as military considerations favored such a course. The Union victories in the Southwest, chief of which was the capture of Fort Donelson, had caused gloom and demoralization in the capital of the Confederacy, and the recovery from the depression had at this time only begun. A quick advance menacing Richmond would have intensified the dismay of its citizens. McClellan was before the Confederate line of Yorktown with 58,000 troops, reinforcements constantly arriving, and that line was defended by only 11,000. Why did he not make an attack? "Instant assault," he wrote, August 4, 1863, "would have been simple folly." Several excellent authorities maintain, on the contrary, that it would have been the highest wisdom. Indeed, no knowledge of military criticism is necessary to see that unless an army of 58,000 could break through a long line defended by only 11,000, it had no business to venture on an offensive movement. Moreover, McClellan had the authority of his government to make an assault, and in a war waged by a republic such backing ought to be grateful to its general. April 6 the President telegraphed him, "I think you better break the enemy's line from Yorktown to Warwick River at once." The general had a profound contempt for the opinion of the Washington authorities, and in his answer piled up the difficulties with which he had to contend, and complained of the inadequacy of his force. To his wife, with whom he shared his inmost thoughts, he wrote: "The President very coolly telegraphed me yesterday that he thought I had better break the enemy's lines at once! I was much tempted to reply that he had better come and do it himself." April 9 Lincoln wrote McClellan the noble, pathetic, and sensible letter which is often reproduced or quoted from, and which contains, as a direction for

the future, the remark, "It is indispensable to you that you strike a blow." The young general failed to take the course which every consideration prompted, from two defects in the working of his mind. He was irresolute; he habitually overestimated the force of the enemy. For a conceited man and unsuccessful general, McClellan wrote and talked too much, and he had at this time various opinions as to the strength of the enemy he must encounter; but on April 7 he was sure that General Joseph E. Johnston had arrived in Yorktown with strong reinforcements, and that he should have the whole force of the enemy on his hands, which was probably not less than 100,000. It is quite true that as soon as McClellan began his advance towards Yorktown, reinforcements commenced to arrive for Magruder, so that by April 11 he had an aggregate of 31,500, but by this time the Union army reached the number of 100,000 men present for duty. Up to this date, therefore, there was no time when McClellan had not three men to one of the Confederates. April 17 Joseph E. Johnston took command in person at Yorktown of an army which had then reached the number of 53,000. McClellan had missed the golden opportunity for an assault, and perhaps from this time on nothing could have been better than a continuance of the scientific siege operations which he began soon after his arrival before Yorktown.

He went on erecting siege works and planting heavy Parrott guns and mortars against the Confederate fortifications, maintaining all the while a lively correspondence with the department at Washington and with his wife at home. In his letters to the President and the Secretary of War, he resented bitterly that McDowell's corps had been withdrawn from his command; he complained of the smallness of his own force, and intimated that he was outnumbered by the Confederates; he had much to say of the rainy weather, and of the roads deep with mud. To his worshipping and devoted wife, he told of the disadvantages he was laboring under and of his many troubles, in a tone that at times degenerated into childishness; some of his letters, indeed, sound as if they had come from a youth not yet grown, rather than from the captain of a great army. When not childish, he is pursued by phantoms. Not only "the rebels," but "the abolitionists and other scoundrels," are aiming at his ruin. It is the men at Washington to whom he refers when he writes: "History will present a sad record of these traitors who are willing to sacrifice the country and its army for personal spite and personal aims." The President, yearning for the success of McClellan and eager to do every-

thing to effect it, sent him Franklin's division of McDowell's corps; this reached him April 22. Still McClellan did not open a general attack from his batteries. April 28 he called for some 30-pounder Parrott guns from Washington, which brought forth this answer from the President: "Your call . . . alarms me, chiefly because it argues indefinite procrastination. Is anything to be done?"

Turning from the contemplation of the Union general to Johnston, one is impressed with the good fortune of the South in having an able commander for its principal army at the commencement of the war instead of being obliged, as was the case of the North, to grope about in a painful search, through bitter trial and sickening failure, of a general fit to lead the Army of the Potomac. Johnston coolly watched the operations of his adversary, and, surprised that at first he had not assaulted the Confederate line, and now pleased that he delayed the bombardment, wrote with a certain measure of contempt to Lee, "No one but McClellan would have hesitated to attack." When these elaborate siege operations were nearly completed, the Confederate general decided that Yorktown was untenable, and on the 3d of May evacuated it and the adjacent defensive works, with the intention of withdrawing his army to the neighborhood of Richmond. Magruder and Johnston had gained a month, a delay of inestimable value to the Confederate cause. During that month the Richmond Congress passed the Conscription Act; the work of reorganizing the Confederate army and training the Virginia militia went on.

The evacuation of Yorktown took McClellan by surprise. Anticipating serious resistance, he had expected three days later to open with his batteries. Nevertheless, he gave orders for immediate pursuit, while he himself remained at Yorktown to superintend the embarkation of Franklin's division on transports, which should go up the York River. Hooker, with his division, overtook the enemy, and began the battle of Williamsburg, which was fought without a plan, under confused orders and defective disposition of forces, and which, though somewhat relieved by a brilliant exploit of Hancock, then commander of a brigade, resulted in a Union defeat and considerable loss. McClellan arrived on the field at about five o'clock in the afternoon, receiving, as he always did, loud and enthusiastic cheers from his men, but the battle of Williamsburg was over. He made a disposition of forces for the conflict which he expected would be renewed on the morrow, but that night the Confederates marched away from Williamsburg, in pursuance of their retreat to Richmond. McClellan

followed with almost incredible slowness. From Williamsburg to the place where his army went into camp on the Chickahominy, a distance of forty to fifty miles, it took him a fortnight to march. The roads, of course, were bad. In a somewhat merry mood he enlivens his book with an anecdote of which he more than once thought during this campaign, and from which he might have drawn an apposite lesson. McClellan asked an old general of Cossacks who had served in all the Russian campaigns against Napoleon, how the roads were in those days. "My son," he replied, "the roads are always bad in war." Virginia mud is a factor which must be taken into account in the consideration of many campaigns, but the young general exaggerated the inclemency of the weather and the difficulty of the roads even as he did the force of the enemy. Lincoln, undoubtedly weary of this constant grumbling, and observing that the Confederates marched in spite of bad roads, and made attacks in spite of rough weather, once wittily said: "McClellan seemed to think, in defiance of Scripture, that Heaven sent its rain only on the just and not on the unjust."

On the morning of May 11, when nineteen miles beyond Williamsburg, McClellan learned that the Confederates had evacuated Norfolk and destroyed the iron-clad *Merrimac*. This opened up the James River to the Federal vessels and gun-boats, and should, by the highest military considerations, have suggested to him that that river offered the more advantageous line of advance on Richmond, making available as it did the co-operation of the navy, avoiding the fever-breathing swamps of the Chickahominy, and threatening the most important communication of the Confederate capital with the states farther south. McClellan is wise after the event, and in his report of August 4, 1863, and in his book acknowledges that the approach to Richmond by the James was a safer and surer route than the one adopted; but with his incapacity to admit that he ever made a mistake, he ascribes his evident failure in strategy to the administration at Washington. Repeatedly asking for reinforcements, he sent, May 14, to the President a respectful and reasonable despatch, the gist of which was: "I ask for every man that the war department can send me by water." Four days later the Secretary of War replied, that while the President did not deem it wise to uncover the capital entirely by sending the forces available by the water route, he had, however, ordered McDowell with his 35,000 or 40,000 men to march from his camp opposite Fredericksburg overland and join the Army of the Potomac either

north or south of the Pamunkey River, and he directed McClellan to extend his right wing north of Richmond in order to establish this communication as soon as possible. This command, declares McClellan, is the reason why I did not operate on the line of the James. Yet the statement is effectually disproved by his official and private correspondence at the time, in which there is not the slightest allusion to a desire to make such a movement; in fact, the tenor of all his despatches and letters is that he expected to fight Johnston's army between the Chickahominy River and Richmond. Moreover, he knew of the destruction of the *Merrimac* May 11, and he did not get the notice of the promised reinforcement by McDowell until the 18th, giving him a full week to consider and adopt the plan of moving on to Richmond by the line of the James River, which he had unhampered power to do and which is exactly what he should have done.

As soon as the destruction of the *Merrimac* was known, the *Monitor* and several gunboats started up the James. Their approach to Richmond caused more of a panic in that city than did any direct menace of McClellan's army of 100,000 during the whole of the Peninsular Campaign. There were indeed anxious hearts in the capital city when the Union troops first appeared before Yorktown; but when McClellan, instead of attacking the Confederates, went on with his scientific siege operations, anxiety gave way to wonder and to contempt for his generalship. The fall of New Orleans was a blow, and the destruction, a fortnight later, of the *Merrimac*—"that great gift of God and of Virginia to the South"¹—seemed disaster crowding upon disaster. Although McClellan's military ability was despised, the march towards the capital of the Confederacy of his well-trained and equipped army could not be looked on without apprehension. While there was a quiet confidence in Johnston, strictures on Jefferson Davis were not uncommon. Of him who became the greatest Southern commander and who was now acting as military adviser to his President, the *Richmond Examiner* said: "Evacuating Lee, who has never yet risked a single battle with the invader, is commanding general;" and, after Yorktown had been given up, it sneered at "the bloodless and masterly strategy of Lee." We must bear all these circumstances in mind to understand the trepidation with which the people heard that the *Monitor* and the Federal gunboats were at City Point, afterwards within twelve miles and then within eight miles of Richmond. Davis had himself baptized at home and the rite of

¹ *Richmond Examiner*, May 13.

confirmation administered to him in the Episcopal Church of St. Paul's. He had appointed by public proclamation a day for solemn prayer. A victim to anxiety, he insisted that his wife and family should go to Raleigh. The families of the cabinet secretaries fled to their homes. These facts, and the adjournment of the Confederate Congress the previous month, seemed to lend confirmation to a report now gaining ground that Richmond would be abandoned. The packing of trunks was the work of every household; refugees crowded the railroad trains. People fled in panic from the city with nothing but the clothes they had on; and their action was not from baseless fear. New Orleans, they thought, had been ignobly surrendered. What should save Richmond? Davis's letters to his wife breathe discouragement. "I have told the people," he wrote, "that the enemy might be beaten before Richmond or on either flank, and we would try to do it, but that I could not allow the army to be penned up in a city." The evidence seems good that the government archives had been sent to Lynchburg and to Columbia.

May 15, the *Monitor* and the Federal gunboats reached Drewry's Bluff, eight miles below Richmond, on the James River. There they encountered a heavy battery and two separate barriers formed of spiles, steamboats, and sail vessels, and found the banks of the river lined with sharpshooters. As the boats advanced, the Confederates opened fire; this was soon returned, and the battle was on. Richmond heard the sound of the guns, yet consternation did not reign. The panic-stricken had left the city, and resolute citizens had stemmed the current of alarm. The day previous, the General Assembly of the Commonwealth resolved that the capital should be defended to the last extremity, and appointed a committee to assure President Davis that all loss of property by the state and by the citizens involved in such a determination would be cheerfully submitted to. Davis said to the committee: "It will be the effort of my life to defend the soil of Virginia and to cover her capital. I have never entertained the thought of withdrawing the army from Virginia, and abandoning the state. If the capital should fall, the necessity of which I do not see or anticipate, the war could still be successfully maintained on Virginia soil for twenty years." To the sound of the enemy's guns, Governor Letcher affixed his hand and seal to a call for a meeting at the City Hall for the purpose of providing for the defence of Richmond. Before the time of the meeting, the news came that the Federal gunboats had been repulsed, and this added joy to the enthusiasm with which the assembled citizens listened to the

pledges of the governor and the mayor that the city should never be surrendered. Confidence was restored, and not again during this campaign of McClellan was it so rudely disturbed. There had been a fine chance for an energetic Union general who knew his enemy. After the naval engagement of May 15, it was the opinion of Seward, then on a visit to the scene of operations, that a force of soldiers to co-operate with the navy on the James River "would give us Richmond without delay." While McClellan failed to take advantage of the favors which fortune lavished upon him, the public of the Confederacy, as well as its generals, had their opinion of this Fabian commander confirmed, and they could not conceal their derision at his lack of enterprise.

If the hopeful North and the anxious South could have known McClellan's inward thoughts during these days, there would have been reason neither for hope on one side nor anxiety on the other. In his letters to his wife, he spoke of his defeat at Williamsburg as a "brilliant victory," and asserted that he had given the Confederates "a tremendous thrashing." May 12 he asked, "Are you satisfied, now, with my bloodless victories?" and May 15 he wrote, "I think that the blows the rebels are now receiving and have lately received ought to break them up."

This is the story of six weeks, or of one-half of the Peninsular Campaign; for it was confessedly a failure when, in the last days of June, McClellan retreated with his shattered army to the James River. In the two battles of Fair Oaks and Gaines's Mill, fought almost a month apart, his tactics were timid and disjointed. He showed himself incompetent to manage an army of 100,000. Nor is this surprising. In June, 1862, it may well be doubted whether, in either the Union or the Confederate army, there was an officer who could handle so large a number of troops to the very best advantage. From Savannah, in January, 1865, William T. Sherman wrote his brother, saying that he did not care to accept the commission of lieutenant-general. "Of military titles," he added, "I have now the maximum, and it makes no difference whether that be major-general or marshal. It means the same thing. I have commanded 100,000 men in battle and on the march successfully and without confusion, and that is enough for my reputation." This letter suggests what may be said in defence of McClellan. It is nevertheless certain that in June, 1862, there were several men South and several men North who could have handled that army better than did McClellan.

The consideration of McClellan's mistakes does not exhaust the chapter of blunders. Stonewall Jackson's brilliant raid into

the Shenandoah valley brings into relief the blunders of Banks and of Frémont. It shows, too, that the story of this campaign cannot be truly told without animadverting on the error of the President in putting such men as Banks and Frémont into places of military responsibility.

JAMES FORD RHODES.